

FENS VIEWS

Islamic Center Looks Inward to Worship, Outward to Community



The familiar form of a minaret marks the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center, which houses a mosque, school, and cafe among other uses.

the two architectural pieces that are so prototypical of Islam," says the Center's executive director, Yusufi Vali. "The minaret and the dome. And then you see the red brick, which is so traditionally Boston. It's our belief that wherever Islam goes in the world, it has to speak to the realities of the community it's in."

In his position, Vali is responsible for speaking to the realities of Roxbury and its surrounding neighborhoods. "Part of our programming is to have the level of excellence in the Center be reflected in the community," he tells me. That includes

things as simple as picking up litter or as complex as diversity training for law enforcement.

Vali describes some of the Center's programs: food distribution every second Saturday, short-term relief for families in need, and participation in the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization addressing issues like affordable housing and criminal justice reform. There's no shortage of projects keeping him and the Center's members busy.

I turn my questions, eventually, to the looming elephant of Islamic extremism. The ISBCC website has a front-and-center denouncement of terrorists who warp the teachings of Islam toward violent ends—even with this public rejection of fundamentalism, do Vali and the Center ever encounter discrimination? "On an institutional level," Vali says, "things are great. We feel incredibly supported by the political establishment [of the city]. My concern and fear is for the kids

who get bullied in school, for the women who wear the hijab." His own wife wears one, he tells me, and can supply stories of dirty looks, muttered insults, drive-by flick-offs.

"[The Center] is often put in a position where we have to defend, defend, defend. It's easy to keep reacting, rather than focusing on the good we do. But our energy is much better spent on our community programming." He pauses. "After the Paris attacks, a police officer asked us: 'Why are people coming to you guys for a statement? You're not those guys. You're part of our community.'"

While we walk, Vali exchanges hellos with a young man outside his office. "That's a good book," he says, gesturing at the boy's copy of *Dwell in Tranquility: An Islamic Roadmap to the Vibrant Marriage*. And then he walks on, remarking over his shoulder that the boy should give his future wife a copy, too. All three of us laugh. There are several moments like this during my time with Vali, moments that make his talk of community sound like more than just good PR.

At the end of the imam's sermon, Mustafa Hannigan ducks under the cordon to join the others in prayer. When they finish, I follow the crowd into the lobby. Before I have a chance to put my shoes on, a stranger approaches. "Are you visiting?" he says.

"I am."

He smiles and introduces himself and offers to buy me a sandwich. When I decline, he shrugs and moves along. I feel bad for brushing him off—I expected something more proselytic from someone offering a free lunch. But that's just how it is here. "This mosque is an open place," says Vali. "It's open for anyone who is curious about Islam. At the end of the day, we're all one human family."

Duke Harten lives in the East Fens. To learn more about the ISBCC or to schedule a tour, visit isbcc.org.

BY DUKE HARTEN

Mustafa Hannigan ushers me through the lobby and into the area of worship, pausing by some shelves to remove his shoes. He indicates I should do the same. "Now, document in your mind where you put them," he says, grinning. It's good advice—by the time Shaykh Yasir Fahmy arrives to lead the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center's (ISBCC) 1:00pm service, my boots will have hundreds of neighbors.

Hannigan shows me to a cordoned-off area where he sets up a video camera to stream the sermon. While he assembles his equipment, I survey the room. Men scroll through their phones and read books they've borrowed from shelves on either side of the *minbar*. Some are dressed smartly, others wear sweatpants and beanies. One is clad in green scrubs.

The congregation comes from all over,

Hannigan explains—many are locals, from Roxbury and Mission Hill and the Fenway. Some are businessmen who visit the center—across from the Reggie Lewis Track Center on Columbus Ave.—when they're in town. Others, he says, drive in from western Massachusetts. By the Center's last count, more than 50 ethnicities are represented here each week.

The main room fills quickly. When Shaykh Yasir Fahmy shows up, both adjoining rooms have reached capacity and congregants are spilling out into the lobby. (Women and children worship in a separate area upstairs.) "You can be a Muslim anywhere and everywhere," the imam says during his sermon. "But the heart of Islam is the house of Allah."

And what a house the ISBCC is. The Center, which sits at the bottom of Mission Hill, is a huge brick structure that includes a mosque, a café, a school, and a multipurpose function space. "When you come in, you see

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